

Special section: activist counter-cinema

Introduction: *Jump Cut* 40th

by Chuck Kleinhans

Part one: back to the roots

Jump Cut celebrated its 40th year of publication in 2014, and anniversaries are always occasions for nostalgia, reassessment, and celebration. We had a bit of each by running a workshop at the 2014 annual conference at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Seattle. It began soberly with the three founding co-editors (Julia Lesage, John Hess, and myself) making some brief remarks and then it was moved to celebratory hi-jinx as our two Canadian compatriots, Tom Waugh and Peter Steven, spoke. So much for taking ourselves too seriously.



Workshoppers at the March 2014 Society for Cinema Studies

But, of course, there are always some serious matters to address. At this time, the end of 2014, and with the embers still glowing from Ferguson Missouri, Gaza, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, U.S. right wing hysteria around child migration and Ebola, the increasing evidence of catastrophic human effects on the planet's environment, the persistent blowback of U.S. intervention in the Middle East and so forth, the logic and necessity of a political radical analysis of media remains more pertinent than ever.

Given *Jump Cut*'s long dedication to considering both a critique of the media mainstream and commitment to an activist alternative, it makes sense to reconsider where we've come from and what we've learned in the process. And it's useful to cluster together several pieces that evaluate what is going on with an activist counter-cinema today.

To begin there's a reprint of a piece that Julia Lesage and I wrote a few years after starting *Jump Cut*. 1977's "Marxism and Film Criticism: The Current Situation" was written for likeminded friends in adjoining fields and for a kind of survey assessment taking place in *The Minnesota Review*. Various radicals, members of the nondogmatic and nonsectarian left, were discussing how intellectuals could contribute to a progressive movement in the wake of the Civil Rights, Anti-War, anti-imperialist and counterculture waves of the 60s and building with the emerging feminist and queer movements. Julia and I were trying to assess the resources and the terrain and project a future direction.

From a slightly later moment, in the 1980s, we reprint Peter Steven's introduction to his anthology, *Jump Cut: Hollywood and Counter Cinema*. The collection of articles from the first decade or so highlighted both the active study of Hollywood and other commercial entertainment cinemas as ideological instances of the capitalist order, but also and equally important, the alternatives—Third World cinema, activist documentaries and experimental art films, films in close relation with political movements and actions, and the growth of a sophisticated and artful understanding of the dominant system. And always the goal was to see the complications of the scene: the often-progressive side of mainstream media, and the need for a hearty (and hopefully productive) political critique of left-leaning creative work.

We also reprint here the introduction to David James' *Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, his edited anthology on alternative arts in Los Angeles. Parallel to his pioneering survey on radical North American cinema in the long 1960s, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, and his acute in-depth discussion of the long history of alternative cinema practices within the heartland of the Hollywood system, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas In Los Angeles*, James' unfortunately orphaned essay deserves attention for cogently arguing for the importance of grassroots alternatives for truly politically progressive

and radical artwork. In a time when “radical” is too often confused with the idea of a single artist gallery show with some moving image screen pieces on the walls, and documentarists want to jump start their careers with feature length works that can be booked into multiplexes, it’s worth returning to the source of political and social movements: ordinary people facing off against another manifestation of neo-liberalism. Or to put it another way if you’re going to make a revolution, you have to do it with the people who are present and accounted for, not with some fantasy projection, or dream of the artist as intrepid leader.

Part two: the radical present

We’ve grouped together several articles addressing the possibilities of a radical activist cinema today. *Jump Cut* has always been especially devoted to trying to think through creative work produced in the present moment while seeing the connections to the historical past of political media struggles and anticipating the changing and complex needs of social and political times. Julia Lesage reflects on the constant renewal of the radical use of documentary for social change by arguing for a multi-faceted complexity in making. Ernie Larsen discusses the longterm work of curating and exhibition that he has done with Sherry Millner. By screening radical political work they found provocation, and sometimes unexpected results, in the after screening situation. Chuck Kleinhans asks what is really subversive by interrogating a rap music video built around “riot porn” images. And Angela Aguayo extends the discussion with an extended discussion of activist street tapes, particularly the now-classic *This is What Democracy Looks Like* covering the Seattle WTO protests. Chris Robé continues the analysis based on his ongoing historical study of activist media from the 1960s to the present.

In future issues we will continue this discussion, covering both old and new work.

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